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AUTHOR	Knight, Diane
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ABSTRACT

This article describes development of the Inventory for Assessing the Job-Readiness Skills of Students Placed in Alternative Classes. Introductory material notes the importance of on-the-job vocational experiences for secondary students with mild academic or behavioral disabilities. The inventory covers three domains, life skills, affective skills, and employability skills, and encompasses 28 separate subskills that reflect those independent daily living skills necessary for students to acquire as they make the transition from school to work. The scale is designed so that the student evaluates his own life skills (personal appearance, communication skills, self-sufficiency, and vocational aspirations), the teacher evaluates the student's affective skills (self-management, initiative, creativity, team participation, interpersonal relationships, and conflict resolution), and the employer evaluates the student's employability skills (work attitude, work habits, job-specific skills, and knowledge of employee/employer roles). The inventory is also intended to identify target skills for direct remedial instruction. Field testing was performed with four high school junior or senior students over a 1-year period. Students, teachers, and employers all reported benefits from use of the inventory, although the time required for completing it was considered a drawback. A sample completed form is attached. (DB)

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Running head: ASSESSING STUDENTS' JOB-READINESS SKILLS

Assessing Students' Job-Readiness Skills to Assure Success in School-Business Partnership Programs

ED 471 219

Dr. Diane Knight
Associate Professor
College of Education
Louisiana State University-Shreveport
9000 West Wilderness Way - Apt. #24
Shreveport, LA 71106
(318) 219-7913 (Home)

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Assessing Students' Job-Readiness Skills to Assure Success in School-Business Partnership Programs

Students with mild academic or behavioral disabilities enrolled in secondary education programs need on-the-job vocational experiences. Quality vocational programs include training in the following: self-advocacy, self-determination, job placement, job maintenance, independent living, financial planning, transportation usage, and community agency support (Brolin, 1997; Goldberger, Kazis, & O'Flanagan, 1994; Karge, Patton, & de la Garza, 1992; Knight & Rieck, 1997). This need is highlighted by the following sets of education & labor statistics:

1. Approximately 62% of students with work experience as part of secondary school vocational education programs maintain competitive jobs, as opposed to 45% without (Bounds, 1997; Halloran & Johnson, 1992).
2. Three to 5 years after graduation, 57% of youth with disabilities are competitively employed, as compared to 69% of the general population (Statistical Profile, 1994).
3. Five years after graduation, vocational services are needed by 60% of youth with disabilities, and only approximately one-third are receiving such services (Statistical Profile, 1994).

On-the-job training provides secondary students with mild disabilities the following four benefits that are not easily acquired in the traditional classroom/school environment:

1. An authentic context for applying problem-solving skills

under normal work-related constraints and pressures.

2. Avenues for exploring diverse careers and exposure to various leadership styles.
3. An appreciation for the connection existing between the worksite and continued learning and personal growth.
4. Opportunities for networking with future employers, adult mentors, and state/community service agencies (Goldberger & Kazis, 1996).

Three key components----school-based learning, work-based learning, and connecting activities---- serve as the framework for promoting career education for students in the community environment by encouraging cooperative work experiences, job shadowing, and mentoring (Bounds, 1997; Lindstrom, Benz, & Johnson, 1997).

Meaningful school-to-work transition planning requires teachers and administrators to address the critical issue of integrating school curriculum and business/industry expectations. For participating employers to embrace the concept of on-the-job training and welcome high school students to their work sites, they must feel they have a vested interest in these employees, and school personnel should seek and value their input regarding the student's placement, assigned responsibilities, and progress. Collaboration between the school (teacher) and the workplace (employer) is imperative.

Likewise, if the student is to benefit from this type of experiential learning experience, he or she must assume the role of self-advocate while actively participating in work-site selection and progress evaluation.

This partnership between the school----student and teacher----and the employer is a manifestation of the goals/objectives developed for the student's individualized transition plan (ITP) in three areas: life skills (such as good hygiene, appropriate clothing and behavior, and transportation skills); affective skills (such as self-confidence, awareness of own interests and abilities, recognition of authority, and ability to work with others); and employability skills (such as good attendance, job knowledge, ability to give and request assistance, and quality work production).

Both formative and summative assessments are the essential keys to a successful transition experience. Data collected for the assessments should reflect joint perspectives, involving the student, teacher, and employer. To ensure that the data accurately demonstrate the student's progress in mastering job-readiness skills, the assessment instrument must incorporate skills the teacher taught in the classroom, as well as those skills the employer expected in the workplace.

Rationale of the Inventory

In an effort to integrate classroom instruction and work-based learning, I designed the Inventory for Assessing the Job-Readiness Skills of Students Placed in Alternative Classes. This instrument provides a structured reflection regarding the student's attainment of job-readiness skills throughout his or her on-the-job training program.

After a careful review, no existing commercial instruments were found that closely matched established state and local vocational education curriculum for students with mild disabilities enrolled in self-contained special education classrooms and pursuing alternative programming. In developing this assessment instrument, the input of teachers and administrators

responsible for implementing and supervising school-to-work programs was encouraged. In addition, the specific types of available work sites, along with the expectations, suggestions, and concerns of participating employers, was considered.

Use of the job-readiness inventory provides all participants----students; teachers; employers----with assistance in transition planning: students can assess their own readiness for employment and plan avenues for change; teachers can identify needed areas of change and , with students, plan next steps; employers can assess the student's entry level of job-related skills and monitor the degree of change during the employment period.

Thus, the student exercises self-determination early on, as he or she assumes an aggressive role, equal to the adult partners, in planning for and evaluating the transition experience. The student, teacher, and employer assess student skills through a Likert-type scale: 3 = skill always observed; 2 = skill sometimes observed; 1 = skill seldom observed; 0 = skill never observed. Skills receiving a rating of 0 or 1 and sometimes 2 (depending on the significance of the skill in the student's life) are then targeted for remediation.

Design of the Inventory

The inventory contains three domains----life skills, affective skills, and employability skills----encompassing 28 separate subskills that reflect the independent daily living skills necessary for students to acquire as they make the transition from school to work. I felt, as well as local school personnel and employees, that these job-related skills are particularly problematic for students with mild disabilities as they initially enter the work force.

Although use of the inventory requires that the student, teacher, and employer assess each of the 28 skills, each domain is actually most easily evaluated by only one of the raters: <u>life</u>

skills, by the student; affective skills, by the teacher; employability skills, by the employer. This construction ensures that the student's readiness for on-the-job training is considered from a holistic, ecological perspective. Each of these domains is described below:

Life Skills

The student is required to realistically assess his or her personal appearance, use of both verbal and nonverbal communication skills, and vocational aspirations. Evaluation by the student of his or her daily personal self-sufficiency from an intrapersonal perspective encourages him or her to reflect on the innate qualities of self-direction, motivation, and intrinsic values, which will be necessary for securing and maintaining gainful employment. Life skills may be overlooked as needing direct instruction to acquire. Teachers and employers often assume that these skills are internalized naturally as the student matures or are taught by parents.

Affective Skills

The teacher rates the student's skills related to self-management, initiative, creativity, team participation, and conflict resolution. This domain includes self-esteem, emotional lability and tolerance, and the ability to form and nurture positive interpersonal relationships while being competitively employed. These are basic skills that people with disabilities may not master, because they are often not afforded opportunities to participate in early developmental vocational experiences, such as summer or part-time jobs. As a consequence, job histories, social maturity, and self-advocacy are often lacking.

Employability Skills

The employer evaluates the student's overall work attitude, general work habits, job-specific skills, and knowledge of employee/employer roles. Employers observe the student's

ability to adapt and modify his or her behavior, while demonstrating both responsibility and maturity, when faced with authentic work-related challenges. Skills in this domain are transferable, to some extent, from a classroom learning situation, but are best assessed in a real life work situation. This domain of skills reflects the relevance of what the student learns to what he or she does on the job.

Use of the Inventory

Completion of the inventory begins before each student's actual arrival at his or her respective job site and concludes after the student has finished the required clock hours. The following are steps for completing the inventory:

Step 1: Initial Student Rating

The student initially completes the "Student Rating" (SR) column of the inventory by filling in the date and by rating his or her perceived ability to perform each of the 28 separate skills within the three domains. The teacher may provide assistance with the meaning of words or concepts. This step may occur while the student is a member of a small group. During the field test, four participating students completed the inventory during the 6-week period before their actual on-the-job placement.

Step 2: Initial Teacher Rating

Before on-the-job training begins, the teacher completes the "Teacher Rating" (TR) column of the inventory. This should ideally involve the use of a separate form, so the teacher's perceptions won't be influenced by the student's initial ratings. The teacher should then transfer his or her scores to the student's form for ready comparison.

Once the teacher has completed an inventory for each student, he or she should conduct individual interviews and discuss the separate skills with each student. For those target skills rated as 0 or 1, and perhaps 2, the teacher and the student should develop a plan for remediation; the teacher then notes remedial strategies in the first "Means of Addressing Target Skills" (TS) column with the day's date.

Step 3: Initial Employer Rating

The employer completes the "Employer Rating" (ER) column of the inventory after the student has been on the job for approximately 2 weeks (10 hours). Observation at this time will permit an assessment of skills before any remediation efforts. These ratings should be based on perception of the student's ability to perform each skill at the level required for the specific job placement.

Again, the employer should use a separate form to prevent rater bias. The teacher should then transfer the employer's ratings to the student's initial form, so that all scores (student, teacher, and employer) are conveniently presented together for comparison purposes.

Step 4: Initial Comparisons and Planning

The teacher compares the employer's ratings for each skill within the three domains with ratings already assigned by himself or herself, as well as the student. The teacher especially notes the employer's ratings for those previously selected target skills for which the teacher and the student have developed a remediation plan.

The student, teacher, and employer then hold a conference to select several of these target skills for remediation. The skills should meet the following criteria: most pertinent to the student's current job placement requirements; most representative of his or her independent daily

living needs and transferable from situation to situation; most realistically achievable considering both the student's ability level and given time constraints of the transition experience.

Step 5: Direct Instruction, Role-Playing, and Discussion

The plan is implemented during the student's on-the-job training program. Those target skills selected for remediation become the subject of focalized instruction. The job coach observes the student on the job and initially provides direct skill instruction, then gradually fades from the scene as the student acquires and then masters the targeted skills.

The employer, too, serves as a role model by mimicking the strategies introduced by the job coach. Job shadowing, role-playing, discussion, and successive approximations of skill mastery are encouraged. When feasible within the classroom setting and community environment, the teacher also provides instruction, along with opportunities for skill generalization and reinforcement.

Once the student completes the on-the-job training program, the student, teacher, and employer hold a closing conference. The participants analyze the student's progress toward remediation of the target skills, and the teacher records remarks, along with the day's date, in the second TS column of the inventory. When applicable, the group may choose other skills----those not adequately mastered or additional ones needing mastery from the inventory----as target skills for the student's next on-the-job placement. During the field test, this conference was held during a 2-week period immediately following completion of each student's required clock hours. Figure 1 reflects a sample, completed inventory.

Insert Figure 1 About Here

Field Test of the Inventory

To evaluate the value of using this inventory during a student's on-the-job training program, it was field-tested over 1 school year. A local school district special education teacher/job coach agreed to incorporate it into his program. He randomly selected four students from his vocational education classroom of 20 juniors and seniors to follow over the 2-semester period. Because of significant deficits in basic academic skills, these students were enrolled in self-contained special education classrooms in alternative to regular placement programs and working on Certificates of Achievement (not pursuing Carnegie Units or GED diplomas). The students all had mild disabilities (specifically, learning disabilities, mild mental retardation, and other health impairments). Each student had spent his or her freshman and sophomore years pursuing functional academic classwork developing skills in reading, mathematics, interpersonal relationships (social awareness), and occupational preparation (resume development; completion of job applications and related forms; interview preparation; workers' rights; etc.).

The first 6-week period of the junior and senior years was one of intense vocational preparation related to the specific job of each student, before his or her actual on-the-job placement. From a listing of community businesses approved by the local school district to participate in the school-to-work program, the teacher (with student input) selected three different employers/work sites, representing city public and/or nonprofit agencies. The selections were based on the four students' interests and ITP goals and objectives. All four

students spent a total of 120 hours each semester (2-3 hours per day) at actual work sites, in addition to continuing daily academic and vocational instruction at school. Students received minimum wage, and each participant was responsible for arranging his or her own transportation to and from work (personal vehicle; public transportation; school district special education bus).

Two of the students were employed as custodial workers at a city recreation center, one as an aide at a day-care center for infants and toddlers, and one as a secretarial assistant at a city school working with data processing. Initially, the special education teacher/job coach observed each student at his or her work site 2 hours each week; as the first semester progressed, this time was reduced to 1 hour every 2 weeks, then to 1 hour each month toward the end of the second semester.

Results

Benefits

Collaboration between the school and the workplace appears as the most significant advantage to using the inventory. An additional benefit is that the inventory samples a wide range of skills, which can be specifically keyed to the student's ITP goals and objectives. The three employers participating in the field test felt that by using the inventory, they not only obtained a clearer picture of the student(s) placed at their respective work sites, but were viewed and respected as members of the educational team. The job coach supervising the students in the program reported that the inventory allowed him to share the demands of decision making regarding mastered/unmastered skills with another, perhaps less biased adult, who was familiar with the student's ability. When the students were questioned about their perceptions of the

inventory, a common answer was, "It made me take a closer look at myself, my abilities, and what I can and can't do, but should be able to do."

Challenges

The biggest drawback to using the inventory, according to the field-test participants, was that of the time required for completing it. This was particularly true for the job coach, who was responsible for transferring scores on forms and arranging interviews and conferences. Both teacher and employer noted, however, that, as one becomes more familiar with the form, less time is required for completion.

An additional concern highlighted by both teacher and employer was that some skills were difficult to teach via direct instruction; and, in some cases, chances for reinforcement were minimal. Another possible disadvantage was that limited opportunities for observing some skills presented themselves; therefore, participants felt that assessment of mastery was questionable.

Conclusions

To meet society's expanded needs for a skilled work force, secondary schools must revitalize their curriculum offerings to reflect more authentic, relevant vocational training options. Students with mild academic or behavioral disabilities will comprise a sizable percentage of this population and will require not only intensive academic instruction, but work-site training in life skills, affective skills, and employability skills.

School-based planning teams must write ITP's to provide realistic goals and objectives, emphasizing structured educational and vocational activities that will lead to students' acquisition and maintenance of competitive employment in the community. Use of the Inventory for Assessing the Job-Readiness Skills of Students Placed in Alternative Classes provides a

comprehensive way for transition teams to monitor both student placement and progress in on-the-job training programs.

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Figure 1 Emily's Job-Readiness Skills Ratings

STUDENT: Emily Carpenter BIRTHDATE: 12/2/79 AGE: 17

SCHOOL: Northside High GRADE: 11

JOB COACH: Larry Aucoin EMPLOYER(S): City of Lafayette (Day Care Center)
Linda George, Supervisor

DIRECTIONS: Using the Following Keys, Consider Each Item by Completing the Corresponding Columns:

SR = Student Rating of Skill
TR = Teacher Rating of Skill
ER = Employer Rating of Skill
TS = Means of Addressing Target Skill
D = Date of Each Column's Completion

3 = Skill Always Observed
2 = Skill Sometimes Observed (Sometimes Remediate, Depending on Skill)
1 = Skill Seldom Observed (Always Remediate)
0 = Skill Never Observed (Always Remediate)

	D 9/15/97 SR	D 9/18/97 TR	D 9/23/97 TS	D 10/23/97 ER	D 5/22/98 TS
I. LIFE SKILLS:					
A. Exhibits Proper Grooming & Hygiene	3	3		3	
(B.) Wears Appropriate, Well-Maintained Clothes	3	2	Observe Co-Workers Model Own Actions	2	Dressed for Safety/Seasonally
(C.) Utilizes Transportation	2	2	Plan/Practice	2	Learned to Change Buses - Late 4 times/year
D. Practices Appropriate Listening & Responding	2	3	Schedule	3	
E. Sets Realistic Goals & Plans for Attainment	2	2		2	

Additional Comments: _____

II. AFFECTIVE SKILLS:					
A. Recognizes Interests & Abilities	2	2		3	
B. Possesses Self-Confidence & Sense of Self-Worth	2	2		2	
(C.) Demonstrates Self-Organization	2	2	Use Daily Checklists	2	Kept in File - Submitted
D. Recognizes & Accepts Authority	2	3		3	

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Figure 1 Emily's Job-Readiness Skills Ratings *(continued)*

	D 9/15/97 SR	D 9/18/97 TR	D 9/23/97 TS	D 10/22/97 ER	D 5/22/98 TS
(E.) Follows Directions & Observes Regulations *	3	2	Shadow Mentor	2	Needed Occasional Reminding
F. Shows Respect for Others' Rights & Property	3	3		3	
G. Accepts & Gives Praise & Criticism	3	2		3	
(H.) Anticipates Consequences of Actions	3	2	Class Role-Playing — Discussion	1	Passive Participation in Weekly Staffings with Co-Workers
I. Identifies Subtleties of Communication	3	3		3	
J. Displays Personal Interactions with Others	2	2		3	
K. Engages in Individual & Group Activities	3	2		3	

Additional Comments: * Emily is working with a group of experienced "caregivers" – she will have to really "do" to meet their standards. She is very respectful toward adults.

III. EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS:

(A.) Exhibits Good Attendance & Punctuality *	3	2	—	1	—
B. Demonstrates Occupational Safety	3	3		3	
C. Possesses Knowledge of Basic Workers' Rights	3	2		2	
(D.) Identifies Job Requirements	3	2	Obtain Job Description	2	Presented / discussed in Class / to Employer
(E.) Shows Initiative for Beginning Tasks	2	1	Prompts / Cues	1	Rewards for Decreased Need for Prompts / Cues
F. Follows Task Analysis of Assignment	3	3		3	
G. Asks For & Gives Assistance	3	3		3	
H. Responds to Supervision	3	3		3	
(I.) Adjusts to Changes in Routine & Assignment	3	2	Prepare weekly calendar - check for Daily Changes	1	Some Problems with Handling Last-Minute Changes / Crisis
J. Completes Tasks in Timely Manner	2	3		3	
K. Produces Quality Work	2	2		3	
(L.) Recognizes Remunerative Work Aspects	2	2	Class Activities on Budgeting	1	Obtained / Cashed Check at Work

Additional Comments: * Emily possesses some medical problems beyond her control – causes sporadic attendance problems.

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